

Legislators consider aid for Maine fishermen

Proposal would pay \$10.5M over 3 years to trawler fishermen

PORTLAND (AP) — Fishermen would receive financial aid to help pay for fuel, ice, trucking and landing fees under an assistance package under consideration in the Legislature aimed at keeping alive Maine's ailing fishing industry.

The proposal being pushed by a legislative committee would pay out \$10.5 million over three years to reimburse trawler fishermen for certain business expenses. To qualify, a boat would have to bring 90 percent of its catch to Maine.

Rep. Herb Adams, D-Portland, said the package would help shoreside businesses that support the fishing industry, such as fish processors and ice vendors, as well as fishermen.

The industry, he said, deserves support until fish populations rebound.

"It keeps an historic Maine tradition alive until better days," he said.

The fishing industry has come under pressure in recent years from strict federal fishing regulations and declining populations of groundfish such as cod, haddock and flounder in New England waters.

Many Maine fishermen have simply quit the business. Others are making more trips to Massachusetts ports, where they can take lobsters they inadvertently catch in their nets — a practice that is outlawed in Maine.

Maine fishermen recently proposed that they be allowed to bring lobsters to Maine ports, but the Legislature's Marine Resources killed it in a unanimous vote. The committee, however, voted to form

a subcommittee to take a look at other ways to help the industry.

The ensuing package includes reimbursing fishermen for the 15-cent per-pound handling fee they pay for bringing fish to the Portland Fish Exchange and reimbursing them for ice they buy from one of the state's two remaining ice vendors.

The proposal would also reimburse midcoast fishermen 5 cents a pound for the cost of trucking their catch to the fish exchange, and exempt fishermen from the state's sales tax on diesel fuel.

The Marine Resources Committee will review the details of the package this week. The House and Senate may vote on it next week.

The package could help the industry survive until fish stocks rebuild, said Craig Pendleton, a Saco fisherman.

"We can't lose sight of the potential," Pendleton said. "We have to protect the fishing families for the time being so we can get through the tough times and catch fish again."

Roger Fleming, a senior attorney with the Conservation Trust, which has clashed with fishermen over regulatory issues, said he supports the aid package.

"It keeps the industry in place, but the longer-term solution is to make changes in fisheries management to help us bring the stocks back," he said.

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**Rep. Herb Adams,
 D-Portland**

